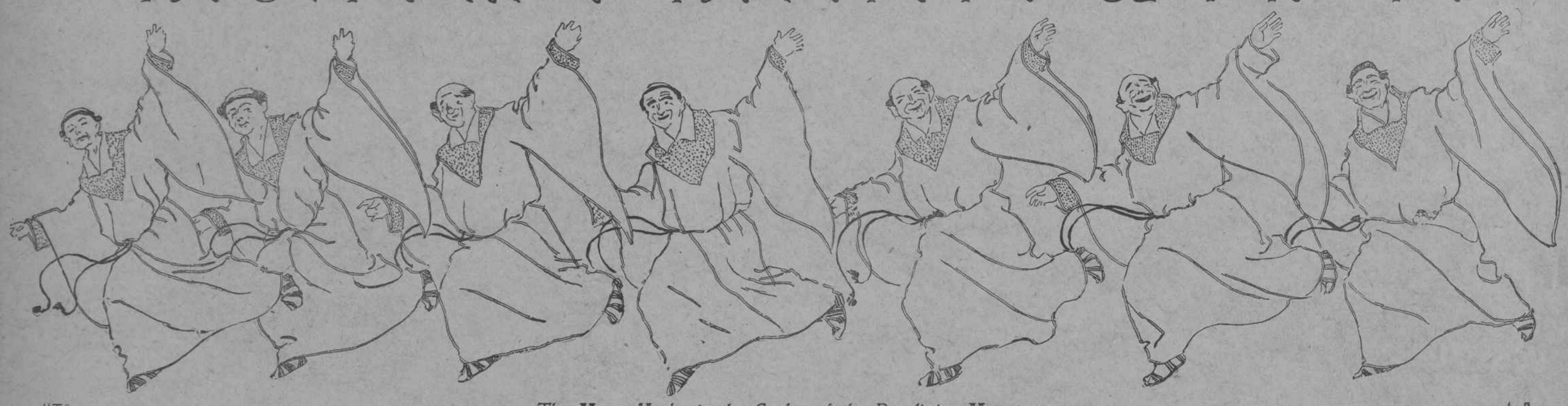
THE BOSTONIANS IN "THE SERENADE"---BY ALAN DALE.



The Merry Monks in the Garden of the Benedictine Monastery.

"The Bostonians Forgot to Fasten Their Doors and Something New Dropped In."

THE BOSTONIANS can, one and all of them, fall on their knees and utter glad loud thanks to Victor Herbert and Harry B. Smith for "The Serenade." They should do this with meek humiliation, and afterward, in sober reflection, they can ponder upon the full significance of their success. The truth will dawn upon them, and the folly of the phrase, "famous, original Bostonians," will be gradually apparent. We are so heavily indebted to the Bostonians for delightful entertainments and for the very essence of comic opera that New York is not anxious to lose so reputable an organization. Therefore at this particular stage of March, 1897, it will not be amiss to discuss the Bostonians seriously. The glamour of that "first night" is over. All the bouquets have been thrown (although Mrs. Bartlett Davis doubtless has a few more in reserve), and the Bostonians are in the glad ozone of our refreshing midst once again, in comfort and in dignity, and in "The Serenade."

The Bostonians, however, in old-fashioned arrogance, persist in adjectiving themselves as "famous and original." In the persistent antiquity of their notions it has not occurred to them that in this age of progress to be the "famous, original" anything is a stigma rather than a fact to be advertised. Our up-to-date stars would plunge into hysterics if you dared to allude to them as famous and original. Imagine talking of the famous, original Lillian Russell, the famous, original Francis Wilson, or the famous, original De Wolf Hopper! What we want nowadays is kaleidoscopic change from our stage favorites, and most of them are wise enough to know that. They accommodate themselves to the times. They vary their tactics.

Miss Russell has long ago abandoned her appeal to the jeunesse doree for one to the intelligence of the theatre-going public. She sings and she acts. She is still Lillian Russell, but not the "famous, original" Lillian Russell. That lady was a plump siren, with a penchant for airing her husbands in the newspapers. That lady exists no more. The "famous, original" Lillian Russell is extinct. Francis Wilson has also revolutionized his early methods by relegating vulgarity to the background. Not so very long ago he was the "famous, original" Francis Wilson, in a comic opera, the most humorous indication of which was the spitting out of food in the face of the audience.

As for De Wolf Hopper—the gentleman we now see under that title is an artist. Years ago, when he was the "famous, original," Mr. Hopper was a clown, and a very obstreperous one. Everything was made subservient to his undignified antics. He rioted, and acrobated and rampaged. We surfeited of it all. Mr. Hopper knew it, and he crept up to the times so insinuatingly that he is with us still, more potent than ever, and far more delectable.

The Bostonians were lulled into a pleasant sense of security by the phenomenal vogue of "Robin Hood." The composer and librettist of that opera counted for very little with them. "Robin Hood" was received with loudest praise, and for months the papers were filled with glowing eulogies of Cowles and Barnabee and Macdonald and Jessie Bartlett Davis. They swallowed all the plaudits without digesting them. They revelled in success. "Robin Hood" was sung until its threads stood out, until its vitality was sapped, until the barrel organs took it up, and ground out "Oh, Promise Me" and "Brown October Ale," ad nauseam. The Bostonians were not disturbed.

Impressed with a perilous sense of their fame and originality, they made mild bids for new operas, not because—forsooth!—they believed that the public hungered for new opera, but because the public desired the Bostonians in something—anything—that wasn't "Robin Hood." The new operas were produced with the most dismal results. There was nothing but weariness in these new operas—nothing but weariness and famous, original Bostonians. It was instantly apparent to everybody, but the Bostonians, that good singers cannot save bad operas. Each opera in the series that followed "Robin Hood" was received with frigid politeness. Yet in each opera were Cowles, and Barnabee, and Macdonald, and Jessie Bartlett Davis.

And so things dragged, and we lost hope. We scanned the horizon for something new. We put away the Bostonians in our albums of reminiscence. Occasionally we wrote pungent regrets anent their lack of energy. We couldn't quite give them up. Whenever a new good comic opera was presented, we cried: "Why didn't the Bostonians get it?" I call it all very praiseworthy on our part. We were much more anxious to keep the Bostonians than they were to keep us. Their lack of anxiety, however, was wholly due to the malarial influence of the egotistic swamp.

In their aimless angling they managed to net "The Serenade." In it they saw opportunities for Cowles, and Barnabee, and Macdonald, and Jessie Bartlett Davis. That was quite enough. They landed it, tenderly cooked it and served it up. And they brought it to New York City and offered it to us as a new opera for the "famous, original Bostonians."

By some delightfully coruscant mistake, the Bostonians forgot to fasten their doors, and—something new dropped in. By a weird fluke, the famous original brand was adulterated with copious doses of Miss Alice Nielsen, and the Bostonians, evidently unaware of their diluted condition, made no allusion to it. The new-comer jumped into favor with a joyous bound. How young she looked! How fresh was her voice, how vivacious her methods, how un-original and un-famous her poses! We could scarcely believe our eyes and our ears. A novelty introduced by the Bostonians! Imagine it, if you can! The reluctant audience allowed its reluctance to do the vanishing act, and after Miss Nielsen had sung "In Fair Andalusia," the theatre felt warm and all aglow, and the Herbert-Smith "Serenade" radiated success.

I suppose that if such a denouement had been even suggested, Mrs. Jessie Bartlett Davis would have doubled the roles of Dolores and Yvonne. Fortunately such successes are generally made unexpectedly, and Miss Nielsen's hit came upon us perfectly unawares. This young woman is precisely the sort of "new blood" that the Bostonian organization needs. She has voice, temperament and youth, added to which, just at present, Miss Nielsen is superbly unconscious of her own merits. That is why I sincerely hope that the Bostonians will keep all the criticisms away from her, and allow her to believe that she is really nothing more than pallid support to the famous original troupe. I also hope that she has a long contract with the Bostonians, so that no managerial speculator can lure her away and drown her in the stellar torrent. Miss Nielsen is certainly the most promising prima donna New York has had for a long time. There is no doubt at all but that she can do even more than she has already done; and that is why it is best for her to remain with the Bostonians and work out a worthy apprenticeship in the chastening role of a "secondary consideration."

As the years roll by we shall have to insist upon Jessie Bartlett Davis and W. H. Macdonald reserving themselves from the roles of dashing young lovers—in their interests quite as much as in ours. There is nothing at all cruel in this suggestion. Women fly into a rage, I am aware, when it is merely hinted that they are not as young as they used to be, and men—oh, yes, men, too—are equally sensitive. But this hyper-sensitiveness is very silly. There is no reason why it should exist.

Jessie Bartlett Davis is incomparable in her way. She has a voice like fine, red velvet—a voice that is not going to "give out" for many a day. As long as Jessie Bartlett Davis can sing, she will be welcome in this city. Her singing of "The Angelus" in "The Serenade" is alone worth the price of admission to the Knickerbocker Theatre. But Mrs. Davis, shrewd woman as she is—with a "press agent" who is always causing her to utter the most breezily sagacious remarks—cannot see very much further than her nose. She still has a hankering for "Little Lord Fauntleroy" parts. If that tedious little prig were set to music, Jessie Bartlett Davis would, I am quite convinced, see nothing incongruous in bidding for the role herself. She is the Mrs. Kendal of comic opera. When we next see the Bostonians—and may they come often and stay long!—Mrs. Davis will, if she be wise, appear in some role that is not supposed to twine itself about the verdant foliage of love. Such roles are always possible. It is not necessary for her to be a duenna, or a comic mother-in-law or anything in the least undignified. She must just unfasten that "famous, original" ticket from her identity and bow to the requirements. Does that sound harsh? I don't think so. Mrs. Davis has no more fervent admirer than myself. I would go miles to hear her sing. There is nobody quite like her. Yet she herself must have felt slightly froissee when that first night audience laughed at the notion of her changing clothes with little Alice Nielsen. It was a malicious laugh, and one that should not be allowed to occur again.

Macdonald should also shelve himself as principal lover. There are plenty of other things he could do more picturesquely than love. It is quite necessary to tell him that. It is kindness. To maintain silence would simply mean that Macdonald would go on loving until the end of the chapter, and possibly making his lovers younger and more hopelessly amorous. I have always found that love episodes in plays and comic operas must not be trifled with. They are the staff of stage life, but they must be very cautiously handled. An audience once laughed while Lillian Russell was making love, and it ruined her season. Audiences watch love scenes breathlessly. They count for more than anything else on the stage. There is no respite from them, but they never lose their power. Men and women are more interested in love than they are in jokes or intrigues. This is the rule. It never varies, and it never will vary. Artists, realizing the importance of this, should be sensible, and look it squarely in the face. Nobody could, with any consistency, feel vitally impressed with the love scenes enacted by Mrs. Davis and Mr. Macdonald. Alice Nielsen and William E. Philp are the sort of lovers that present the tender passion with due spectacular effect.

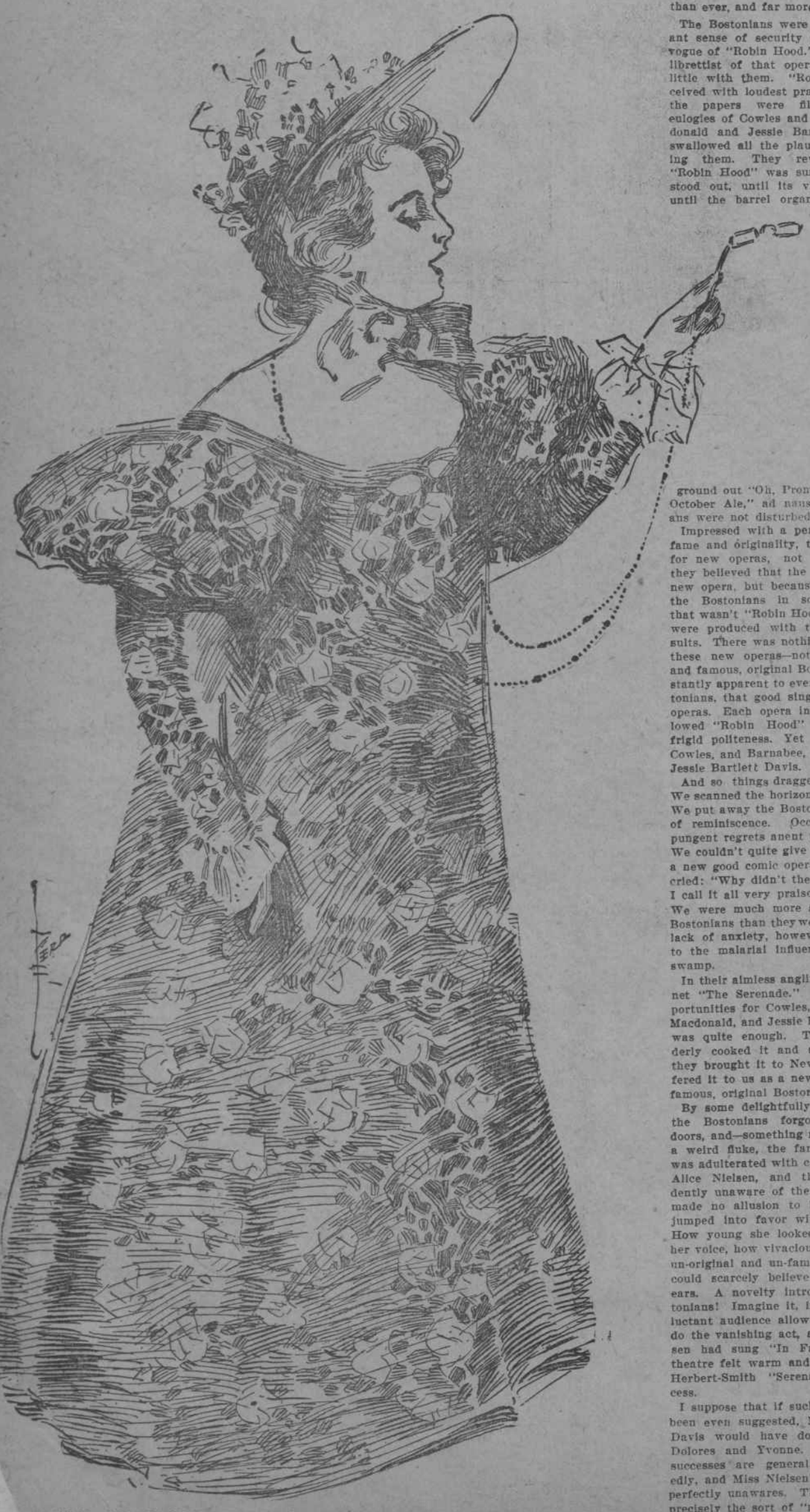
Henry Clay Barnabee is still the vocal humorist of the Bostonians. He is a hard-working entertainer, but I fail to see why he should hanker for so arduous a position. Mr. Barnabee's "famous original" methods have not varied for years. He is not able to sing as easily as of yore, but that makes no difference. He still dips into comic songs, and sings them as rollickingly as he can. Mr. Barnabee is one of the proprietors of the organization, and his word is law. Librettists and composers are not allowed to fit his present shape. They are obliged to model his new clothes upon those that were formerly supplied. Even Patti has her songs transposed to lower keys, and tries to accommodate herself to that which the keenest scientist has never been able to remedy. But Barnabee goes blithely along on the old lines, and is quite satisfied. Old theatre-goers adore him; he is a "favorite," and that means a great deal. But it seems to me that an artist should occasionally consider new theatre-goers. The old generation is not as lucrative an investment as the new one. I wonder if artists ever ask themselves as to the verdict of their youthful patrons? Does it never bother actors, actresses and singers to think that perhaps several scores of young folks are viewing them for the first time?

"The Serenade" at the Knickerbocker Theatre is a glowing success (I should not have given vent to these lines if it had been a failure), and it is a success, not because the Bostonians have come to us branded "famous and original," but because "The Serenade" is a charming opera, with brilliant music and a happy book; and also because it introduces a newcomer, who—as they say in homely parlance—managed to "touch the right spot." This newcomer, Miss Nielsen, distracts the attention from miscast roles and sprays the entertainment with life and spirits and good humor. Can the Bostonians fail to realize this?

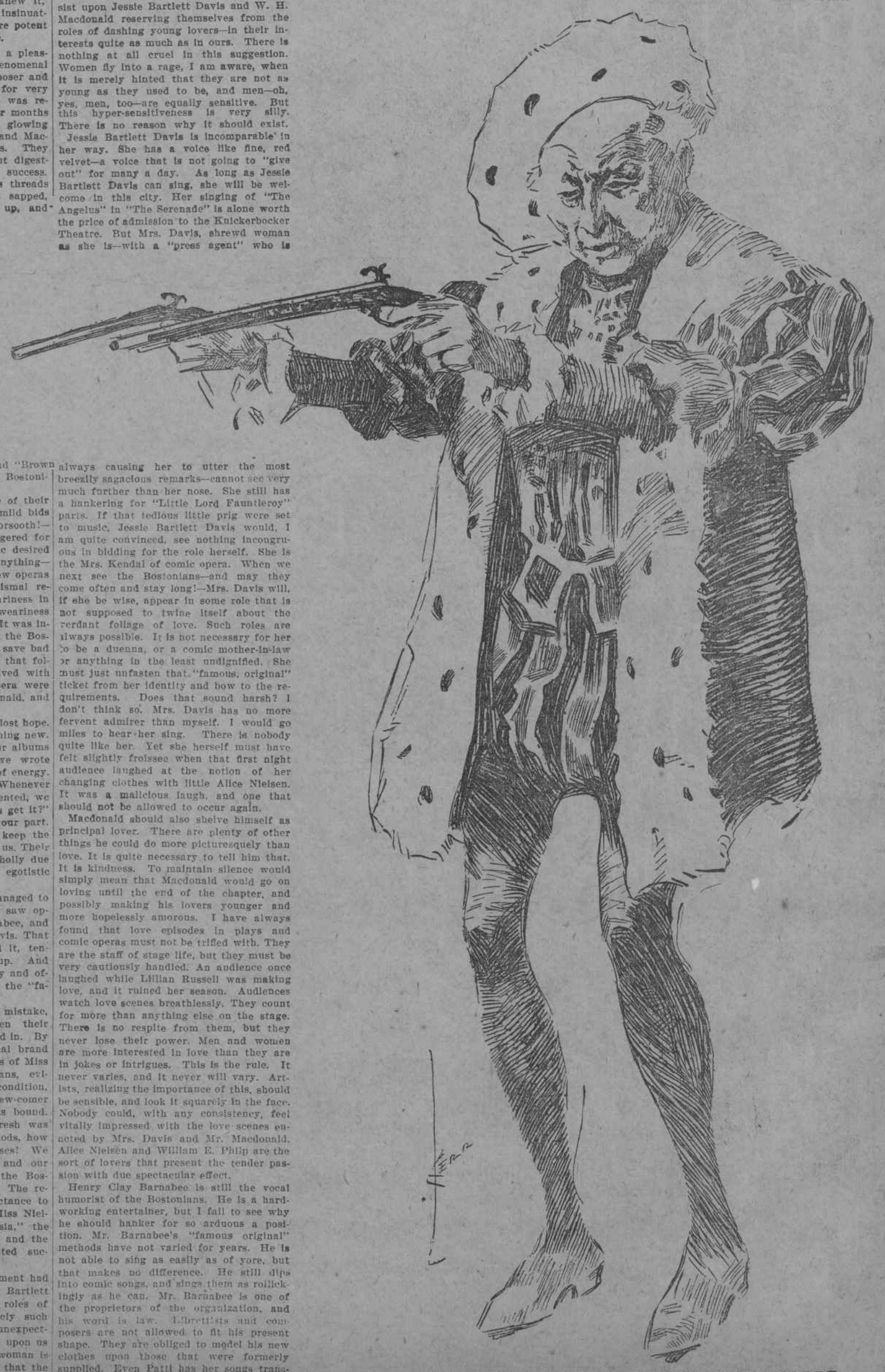
Perhaps the most unchanging Bostonian is Eugene Cowles, who for years will not be asked to do anything new. Cowles is a wonder, fit for grand opera, and yet spared to us! His voice is as amazingly resonant and seductive as ever, and some intelligent perception has induced him to avoid cheapening himself by attempting anything that is out of his depth. Cowles is the matinee girls' comic opera idol, and he deserves that and even higher honors. He is the "old blood" that has not lost a corpuscle. There never was a more convincing comic opera singer than Eugene Cowles.

ALAN DALE.

"A Novelty Introduced by the Bostonians! Imagine It if You Can."



"I'M AN AWFUL FLIRT."---JESSIE BARTLETT DAVIS.



"—— THAT SERENADE."---HENRY CLAY BARNABEE.